

Nearly all houseplants are native to the tropics, where they enjoy warm temperatures and high humidity. In the home this time of year, warm temps are a given, since folks crank their heaters up in the house as the mercury nosedives outdoors. But as you crank the heat, you dry the air, and whereas houseplants prefer humidity levels in the range of 60% to 70%, the humidity in the average house in winter hovers around 15, maybe 20%. And that can be devastating to most houseplants (cacti and succulents excluded).

The trick, then, is to increase the humidity as best you can, and the best way to do that is to mist your plants frequently. As in daily. Or even twice daily. You can also group your plants together and place a humidifier near them, or set the plants on a tray filled with pebbles. Make sure the water level in the tray is slightly below the top layer of pebbles so the pots aren't submerged in water. (Note: Don't mist plants with fuzzy leaves, such as African violets.) Also, try to keep your houseplants away from floor or ceiling registers so they don't get blasted with warm, dry air.

Resist the temptation to water as often as you do during spring and summer. The growth rate of houseplants slows considerably in winter, so they really don't need to be watered as often. In most cases, you should water only when the top two inches of soil is dry.

And again, because of their slower growth rate, houseplants really don't need fertilizer this time of year unless they're in flower. Even then, it's best to apply the fertilizer at only 25% of the recommended amount.

What houseplants do need, however, is an occasional dusting to remove residues that accumulate on leaf surfaces. A paper towel, either dry or soaked in warm water, works just fine.

Finally, be on the lookout for pests, especially if your houseplants spent the spring and summer outdoors. The most common invaders are scale and mealy bugs, both of which can be controlled easily with insecticidal soap or products that contain neem.